

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
Meeting Minutes May 15, 2018
Styx Classroom, 2762 Wildlife Lane,
West Columbia, South Carolina

Members Present:

Vice Chair Cleveland Smith, Titus Duren, Bobby Garmany, Stan Halliday, Stephen Thomas, Martha Herbert, Jonathan Rabon and Sam Hiott.

Members Absent:

Chairman Mike Hutchins

Staff Present:

Emily Cope, Ken Prosser, Billy Dukes, Will Dillman, Sam Chappelle, Shelley Ivester, Charles Ruth, Jay Cantrell, Ross Self, Lynn Quattro, Scott Lamprecht, Jean Leitner and Levi Kaczka.

Others Present:

There were no constituents or other parties present.

Vice Chair Smith opened the meeting.

The minutes of the October 12, 2017 meeting were approved as amended. The minutes of the February 22, 2018 minutes were approved as submitted.

Redeye Bass Overview

Jean Leitner, DNR Freshwater Fisheries Research Biologist, provided a slide show presentation on Redeye Bass, otherwise known as Bartram's Bass. South Carolina has two native species of Black Bass, Bartram's Redeye Bass and the Largemouth Bass. Bartram's Bass is a species unique to South Carolina and the upper reaches of the Savannah. The fish are normally found in cool flowing Piedmont streams, typically in hard, rocky sub straights. They are a species of highest conservation concern in our State Wildlife Plan and throughout the Southeast. The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation put together a conservation plan for Black Bass, and SC's Bartram's Bass were one of their first priority species in the plan. The concern over this fish arose in the 1980's when in lakes Keowee and Russell, Alabama Bass (Spotted Bass), which is not native to any of South Carolina's waters, were introduced by anglers into these lakes. Alabama Bass have been elevated into a separate species after genetic testing. Smallmouth Bass were also introduced into the lakes, with effects on Bartram's Bass. Lakes Jocassee and Hartwell have had a reduction in the last 10 years of Bartram's Bass, whereas lakes Keowee and Russell stayed about the same. It is getting harder and harder to find a pure Bartram's Bass in these lakes. Most species caught are hybrids of Alabama Bass. The most recent field work completed in 2013/2014 followed fish through the steams and reservoirs and collected habitat data. It was found, with the genetic date collected, that we do have streams that are not impacted by the non-native Bass. Most of the hybridization was found closest to the reservoirs. But we also do have streams that are heavily impacted with hybrids, Twelve Mile Creek and Little River being examples. Our priorities now are to better delineate where the pure tributary populations exist and delineate the associated habitats and identify our conservation properties. Some of this work has already started, with the first field season in 2017. Clemson University has a graduate student working on a Bartram's Bass nesting study which has

never been done before. When a nest is located, eggs are collected to help determine whether hybridization is occurring in the stream or are we finding pure eggs and larva and are hybrids coming from the reservoirs and what habitats are they using. Initial data has found that they are using a variety of sub straight types, but cobble and silt seem to be the most often used in the river and the fish are basing their choice on low flows.

Threats presented to Bartram's Bass include an association with human factors and impacts on the landscape as it impacts habitat and the streams. Projected county development over the next 10-15 years and the impact on breeding habitat is being watched so we know what areas with pure populations will need to be protected. The biggest threat is non-native Bass species and introductions within the Bartram's Bass range.

Bartram's Bass has a low profile right now, but is gaining popularity among anglers who fish for different types of bass. It is gaining a name as a fish that is unique, has a conservation need, and is a lot of fun to go out and angle. DNR would like to get the word out about what the threats are to this fish. Redeye Bass has not been recognized as an individual species yet, nor do we know much about their migration patterns.

Santee Cooper Lakes Habitat Enhancement Project

Levi Kaczka, DNR Freshwater Fisheries Biologist in Region IV, presented a slide show about habitat work being done on Lakes Marion and Moultrie. Water willow transplants are the most common source of habitat improvement for erosion for on-shore or near-shore environments. It grows very quickly and provides coverage for several fish species. Transplanting water willow is done by harvesting runners from existing plants and planting them above, below and right at the water line. Fish attractors are another source of habitat improvement and are popular with anglers. Fish attractors are made out of artificial and natural materials. DNR provides maps on our web page showing the location of fish attractors and their GPS coordinates.

Over a 4 year period, beginning in 2014, Santee Cooper gave DNR defective concrete drainage basin culverts. Santee Cooper loaded them on barges and dropped them in the lakes over our fish attractor sights. There are currently concrete structures on 18 of our 32 fish attractor sights. In 2001, Santee Cooper replaced the lock gate to Pinopolis Dam and dropped the lock into Lake Moultrie.

DNR uses natural materials for our fish attractors, such as Christmas trees, wax myrtle branches, and bamboo. We tie the materials to cinder blocks so the blocks drop and the natural material stays vertical. This natural material provides coverage, space and habitat for smaller fish. Over summer 2018, DNR will inventory each attractor to see what material the structure is made of using enhanced sonar equipment.

Public Utilization of Free Hunting Days

Jay Cantrell, Assistant Big Game Coordinator, presented an update on the free hunting days. This was a request made by the Advisory Committee at the February 2018 meeting. This was the fifth year that DNR offered free hunting days, the legislators established them in 2012 and we first implemented them in 2013. They have traditionally been in the month of December and are just for South Carolina residents and are only for people who do not hold a valid hunting license. These days allow residents to go hunting without the normal State required licenses, permits and tags. Federal permits are still required. The free hunting days are not available to people who possess a hunting license.

After meetings with the DNR law division and the new deer tag legislation was again reviewed for the free and youth hunting days, it was discovered that these days were actually exempt from deer tags – either having them in possession, or tagging the deer. But because deer processors require a tag in order to process a deer, DNR came up with a portal page to register and print deer tags to be used on free hunting days. It also allowed DNR to gather information about the people who wanted to hunt on those days: 836 signed up for tags, and 552 supplied email addresses. Of the 836 that signed up, 131

had the same address as a valid license holder, but the names were different, so it is assumed that non-license holders, such as a wife or daughter, were ordering tags to go hunting with the licensed holder. Due to the media attention the free hunting days were given this year, because of the need for registration and deer tags, DNR received some feed-back from the public concerning the fact that non-licensed hunters were out hunting, without proper education or supervision, even though the agency has offered free hunting days for five years. It was an interesting fact that arose out of the situation - which the public did not realize free hunting days have been offered for several years before this year.

DNR will be sending out an on-line survey to the 552 individuals that supplied email addresses to see how they learned about the free hunting days, did they go, who did they go with, etc., and other variable information to gather information as to who these people are, did they take advantage of the free hunting days and what kind of hunting experience they had. This way we can do direct marketing, reaching out to them to possibly purchase a license, or participate in workshops, training, or hunter education. The free hunting days are in addition to the youth days. Starting with the 2018 season, the tagging requirements will no longer be in effect for youth days or free hunting days. DNR will review what days will be made youth days and free hunting days. Legislation does not specify particular dates, it can be any 2 days during the year and does not have to be consecutive days. Committee member Stephen Thomas commented on the ease of registering and printing the tags on-line. Deputy Director Emily Cope commended Big Game Biologists Charles Ruth and Jay Cantrell and the DNR IT Department for their efforts in rolling out the new deer tagging system. Jay commented on the positive impact the new data base will have on hunter recruitment, hunter retention and hunter re-activation. Committee Member Sam Hiott commended the efforts of DNR personnel and programs to recruit hunters.

Gopher Frogs in South Carolina: Efforts to Conserve a Declining Species?

Will Dillman, Assistant Chief of Wildlife – Statewide Programs, Research, and Monitoring, presented a slide show on the Gopher Frog and what DNR is doing to protect this declining species? The frogs are closely tied to longleaf pine ecosystems and have declined for a number of reasons, along with the longleaf pines. In South Carolina the frog appears exclusively along coastal plains. In this state, the Gopher Frog is a state endangered species. To find gopher frogs you have to listen for the sound/call they make, which resembles a low snoring sound. The gopher frog has a bi-phasic life – it spends the majority of its time living in high quality upland longleaf pine savannah habitats and then moves very long distances to breed in ephemeral isolated wetlands. The breeding period occurs after heavy rains. The frogs have been known to move 3 kilometers to breed. It spends a lot of time underground in burrows, hence the name “gopher” frog. Working with this species is difficult - the best way to find them is to listen for them, especially after heavy spring rains. They are very hard to identify, as they closely resemble the Southern Leopard frog. Over the past 15 years DNR has monitored historic ponds to see if they are still active, and in 2014 we did a pilot study to see how they were using upland habitat and ponds. We have been doing new surveys of areas previously undocumented on public lands and more recently private land. The last 2 years we have collaborated with Marshall University and received funding from the US Fish and Wildlife Service to try to quantify the extirpation of the frogs from historic locations in South Carolina. We know the species is declining, but we are trying to quantify exactly how much of the species has been lost. The research involved using automated recording units to record the frogs over long periods of time. The recorders were put at historic breeding ponds and set to record at 5 minute intervals every hour. There were 21 ponds in 1980, and there are still 19 of them in the lower coastal plain. DNR focused our sampling around these 19 ponds during the time frame of December – May, 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. Over the 2 year period, gopher frogs were detected over 7,100 times, 61% of the time it was actually gopher frogs that were detected. We detected gopher frogs at 5 of the 19 historic ponds. Based on the 2 year data, we have had an extirpation of 76% from the known historic breeding sites – a significant loss of breeding habitat for this species. Extirpation of these frogs is

associated with the cumulative decline and loss of available habitat over the last 60+ years. We need to manage habitat to save these frogs, providing open canopied, herbaceous ponds the have good quality uplands associated with them.

Legislative Update

Ms. Cope gave a brief legislative update. The session is at an end. Ms. Cope reported that our budget looks good for the new fiscal year, and that overall, the DNR budget has essentially doubled under Director Taylor's leadership.

Updates

- The Conservation Bank was reauthorized.
- There are changes to the Striper laws - previously on the lower Santee system, it was a 26" minimum, 3 fish limit, closed June through September. The new law is now a 3 fish limit, but they must be between 23" and 25", or one of the 3 may be greater than 26 inches, and the season was extended to June 15.
- The agreement to hunt on Lake Blalock was extended, (a partnership DNR has with Spartanburg Water Authority).
- We were able to get an exemption on Youth Hunting days that no tags are required for any species being hunted on those days.
- The turkey season Sunset has been extended until July 1, 2019. That gives DNR time to give the report in November and work with the General Assembly November – January on what the new turkey changes will be. The 2019 turkey season will be as it has been for the past couple of years and Big Game Biologists Charles Ruth and Jay Cantrell are working on what the recommendations should be for bag limits and the start and end dates of Turkey season.
- A catch and release zone has been established for trout on the lower Saluda river. It is from Stacey's Ledge to the I-20 Bridge.
- There is a Bill to reduce the catch limit for Red drum from 3 to 2, not to exceed 6 fish per boat.

Advisory Committee Member Comments:

Committee Member Steven Thomas commented that every time he orders tags or licenses he is charged an additional \$3 processing fee-that goes to the outside vendor-for each transaction. He would like to see a "cart" system in place to bundle orders. Ms. Cope replied that the vendor, SCI, is contracted by the State and we have no control over them charging the processing fee, but hopefully, when the contract with SCI expires, DNR can go out on our own and submit an RFP for a company that better understands what our agency does, and provides better customer service.

Mr. Thomas asked Ms. Cope to confirm that the DNR Board went with the DNR recommended dates for the Teal season, Saturday through Sunday. Ms. Cope confirmed the decision. Mr. Thomas would like to see a pattern of consistency for these season open dates in the future.

Committee Member Mr. Jon Rabon commented that according to updates he has received, we are making good progress on Murphy Island, getting the water under control after the dyke breach. Ms. Cope told the Committee about a new piece of equipment that DNR has purchased: a track hoe with a cutter head on it that will cut trees up to 14 inches in diameter. Ms. Cope asked Assistant Chief of Wildlife for Regions 2 and 4, Sam Chappelle, to give a recap of repairs being done in the area.

- Murphy Island – Dyke Breach fixed, but now heavily infested with phragmites. We will spray using a helicopter in the fall.

- Cedar Island- A dyke needs to be repaired.
- Lower section of Cape was heavily infested with phragmites –treating it the same way as Murphy Island: We are able to handle a lot of the phragmites with our own staff now and do not have to hire the helicopter.
- Santee Delta East – We have mowed and burned, getting vegetation back.
- Samworth – The breach at Big Field has been fixed.
- Upper Middleton Cut - Breach after flood of 2015, making the first pass before the contractor moves back down to Murphy Island. We have gone all around the Upper Middleton with the new track hoe, the cross dyke has been repaired so we now have water control back on the Upper Middleton as a result of the flood.
- Rabbit Island- Will start removing trees, and should soon put out a bid for the renovation of this island.

There was no old or new business.

Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting:

The next meeting will be held August 14 or 21, 2018. Ms. Cope will talk with Chair Hutchins and decide on a date and location.